

Institutional Relaxation and Aesthetic Rebirth: The Evolution of the Cheongsam During China's Modern Social Transformation

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of China's modern social transformation, the cheongsam emerged from the form of Qing Dynasty banner clothing, achieving an essential leap from a "carrier of feudal etiquette" to a "modern cultural symbol." Its aesthetic evolution was not merely an iteration of clothing styles, but a cultural phenomenon deeply intertwined with institutional changes, ideological emancipation, and technological innovation—from the broad, heavy traditional form to modern tailoring that fits the body's curves, and from a status symbol of hierarchical order to a fashion medium for women's self-expression. Each aesthetic adjustment of the cheongsam bears the marks of the times. Based on documentary research and an interdisciplinary perspective, this paper traces the historical inertia of the feudal clothing etiquette system, analyzes the core driving force of institutional relaxation in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period, and reveals the social and cultural logic behind the cheongsam's evolution. It provides a unique costume history perspective for understanding changes in gender relations, cultural psychology, and social structure in modern China.

Keywords: modern China; social transformation; cheongsam; aesthetic evolution; institutional relaxation; women's emancipation

0. Introduction

In the grand narrative of China's transformation from a feudal monarchy to a modern society, clothing reform has always been one of the most intuitive cultural manifestations, and the rise and aesthetic evolution of the cheongsam are undoubtedly the most representative phenomenon among them. As a clothing symbol spanning feudalism and modernity, the cheongsam not only completed its own style innovation from tradition to modernity, but also carried the ideological emancipation, social reform, and aesthetic awakening of an era, becoming an important window for observing social changes in modern China.

Looking back at China's costume history, the clothing system of the feudal era was always deeply bound to "rule by ritual." Since the establishment of the concept of "wearing robes to govern the world" in the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties[1], clothing has transcended its basic function of covering the body and keeping warm, becoming an institutional tool for defining social hierarchy and maintaining political order. From the curved-front robes of the Qin and Han dynasties to the mandarin hats and peacock feathers of the Qing Dynasty, differences in style, pattern, and material accurately reflected the social status of the wearer, and the logic of "distinguishing status through clothing" ran through the entire feudal era. In the context of a patriarchal society, women's clothing was guided by the core principles of "weakness and humility" and "covering the body to preserve chastity," and its broad, heavy form became an external expression of ritual constraints, suppressing women's natural physical forms and aesthetic needs.

However, the drastic social changes from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republican period completely shattered this millennium-old clothing system. During the late Qing Reform Movement, progressive figures such as Liang Qichao and Tan Sitong had already realized that the path to national strength required learning from Western civilization, and clothing reform, as an important part of social innovation, undertook the historical mission of breaking old systems and opening new horizons. The collapse of the feudal monarchy, the introduction of Western ideas, and the awakening of women's consciousness provided historical opportunities for clothing reform; meanwhile, the upgrading of textile technology, the rise of mass media, and the

innovation of production techniques laid the material and technical foundation for the aesthetic transformation of the cheongsam.

Existing research has constructed a diverse academic system for cheongsam studies. Domestic scholars have conducted solid textual research from the perspectives of clothing thought, macro context, and micro form—Liu Ruipu's team's "cross-shaped planar structure" theory[2], Bao Xinming's material object research[3], and Yuan Ze's integration of mass media historical materials[4] have laid a solid foundation for the study of cheongsam history. Foreign research has supplemented details of the cheongsam's international dissemination from an interdisciplinary perspective, with studies by scholars such as Valerie Steele revealing the cheongsam's identity-construction function in the collision between Eastern and Western cultures[5]. However, existing research still has limitations: it mostly focuses on the golden age of Shanghai-style cheongsam in the Republican period, lacking systematic sorting out of the transitional period from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republican period; research on meaning construction is fragmented, failing to fully reveal the in-depth interactive relationship between the cheongsam and institutional relaxation. Based on this, this paper focuses on "institutional relaxation" as the core driving force, exploring the trajectory and logic of the cheongsam's aesthetic evolution during modern social transformation, and filling the academic gaps in existing research.

1. Historical Inertia and Institutional Nature of Feudal Clothing Etiquette

Since its origin, ancient Chinese clothing has gradually transcended its simple function of covering the body, evolving into an institutional carrier of feudal etiquette and political order. Its development process is closely intertwined with the institutional construction and social thought of various dynasties, forming a traditional clothing system centered on "rule by ritual."

From an evolutionary perspective, clothing in ancient times prioritized practicality and warmth retention. With the improvement of productivity, it gradually acquired decorative and differentiating functions, laying the foundation for the formation of the later clothing system. During the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, the concept of "wearing robes to govern the world" was formally established, and clothing became a concrete expression of ritual system. It defined social hierarchy through differences in style, pattern, and material, marking a key transformation of clothing from a practical attribute to an institutional carrier and initiating the historical tradition of "distinguishing status through clothing." Although the traditional clothing system was impacted during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods due to the "collapse of rituals and music," various vassal states attempted to rebuild clothing order amid turmoil, and ultimately completed the integration of the new clothing system under the unified Qin and Han regimes, further strengthening the hierarchical and ritual functions of clothing.

During the Wei and Jin dynasties, influenced by the emancipation of social thought, clothing style presented an elegant and unrestrained "Wei-Jin demeanor." The broad-sleeved, unrestricted style highlighted aesthetics and individual expression, becoming a brief breakthrough of clothing culture under ritual constraints. However, this individualistic expression did not shake the institutional nature of clothing. Entering the heyday of the Sui and Tang empires, while clothing integrated multi-ethnic elements and displayed the magnificent imperial demeanor, the hierarchical system remained strict, reflecting both the logic of "rule by ritual" and the dual connotations of political authority and cultural confidence. After the rise of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, the concept of "upholding heavenly principles and suppressing human desires" deeply penetrated the field of clothing. Clothing style tended to be simple and elegant, hierarchical regulations became more stringent, and aesthetics gave way to ethical education functions. The reconstruction of clothing culture by Confucian ritual thought made it an important tool for maintaining social order.

The coexistence of national regimes during the Song, Yuan, Liao, and Jin dynasties promoted

intense collision and in-depth integration of clothing cultures. Ethnic minority clothing elements from the Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties interacted with Central Plains clothing, not only changing the external style of clothing but also enriching the cultural connotation of the clothing system. However, the core attribute of clothing as an institutional carrier did not undergo fundamental changes. The Ming Dynasty advocated “restoring Han systems,” establishing a complex and intricate clothing system by learning from and transforming the clothing systems of the Tang and Song dynasties. The hierarchical distinction from imperial robes to commoners’ clothing was meticulous, pushing the expression of traditional “rule by ritual” in the field of clothing to a new height. The Qing Dynasty integrated Manchu clothing characteristics on the basis of inheriting some Ming Dynasty systems, forming the most complex clothing system in the feudal era. Details such as mandarin hats, peacock feathers, rank badges, and banner clothing accurately identified social hierarchy, pushing the institutional and political nature of clothing to its peak, and the logic of “distinguishing status through clothing” was fully implemented.

Throughout the entire feudal society, clothing has always been deeply embedded in national governance and social life as an institutional carrier. The “ritual” and “political” attributes ran through its development process. Even if there were short-term individual expression or cultural integration, it did not break through the logic of the clothing system under the feudal institutional framework. As an important part of this system, women’s clothing has always been guided by the core principles of “covering” and “humility.” Its broad form and cumbersome decorations became external manifestations of ritual constraints, suppressing women’s physical consciousness and aesthetic needs, and laying the groundwork for the reform of the cheongsam in modern times.

2. Institutional Relaxation: The Core Driving Force for the Reconstruction of Modern Clothing System

The drastic changes in social structure and political system from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republican period became the decisive force for breaking the feudal clothing system. The collapse of the feudal monarchy completely destroyed the foundation of the traditional clothing system, while the institutional construction and policy guidance of the Republican government provided a relaxed institutional environment for clothing reform, promoting the essential transformation of traditional clothing from a “carrier of ritual” to a “cultural symbol.”

During the late Qing Reform Movement, progressive figures such as Liang Qichao and Tan Sitong took the lead in advocating clothing reform, closely linking costume change with national strength, race preservation, and social innovation. Liang Qichao once said: “The aesthetic instinct is inherent in all of us, but if our sensory organs are not used often or properly, they will become numb over time. A numb person is a boring person; a numb nation is a boring nation.”[6] Guided by this idea, the hierarchical ethics and political attributes carried by traditional clothing began to be questioned, and clothing reform became an important way to enlighten the people and innovate society. After the 1911 Revolution overthrew the feudal monarchy, the newly established Republican government set out to reconstruct the clothing system, abandoning the mandatory hierarchical norms of feudal clothing and shifting to a modern clothing concept that encouraged practicality, aesthetics, and individual expression.

The promulgation of the 1929 “National Clothing Regulations”[7] marked a landmark event in institutional relaxation. This regulation listed the cheongsam as an alternative formal wear for women, establishing its status as a mainstream clothing style through legislative means and breaking the hierarchical constraints of “distinguishing status through clothing” in feudal clothing. The regulation neither compulsorily stipulated a unified form for women’s clothing nor provided institutional guarantee for the popularity and innovation of the cheongsam through official recognition. This “institutional blank” created broad space for the diversified development of clothing culture. In 1942, the Republican government further clarified the casual and formal styles of the cheongsam, not only continuing its cultural symbolic value but also adapting to the diverse

living scenarios of modern society, confirming the key role of institutional guidance in clothing development.

The in-depth significance of institutional relaxation lies in the fact that clothing completely stripped off its political attribute as a feudal state machine and returned to its practical function as a daily necessity and aesthetic function as a cultural carrier. The introduction of Western clothing and the improvement of traditional clothing coexisted harmoniously. Women were no longer trapped by the traditional concept of “covering the body to preserve chastity” and could actively participate in the innovation and selection of clothing styles. This relaxed institutional environment not only created conditions for the transformation of the cheongsam from a broad form to modern tailoring that fits the body’s curves but also gave birth to women’s physical consciousness awakening and aesthetic awareness, laying the institutional foundation for the cheongsam to become a fashion medium for women’s self-expression. As Zhu Xiao’en emphasized in “On the History of Chinese Clothing Reform” [8], the significance of the Republican clothing system reform lies in the abolition of hierarchy and ethics, which was a revolution in traditional Chinese thought, and the rise of the cheongsam was a concrete manifestation of this revolution in the field of clothing.

3. Aesthetic Evolution: The Cheongsam as a Cultural Mirror of Social Transformation

Institutional relaxation triggered not only the reconstruction of the clothing system but also a profound transformation of aesthetic concepts. The aesthetic evolution of the cheongsam in modern times, from form and function to cultural connotation, fully reflected the transformation trajectory of modern Chinese society, becoming a cultural mirror carrying ideological emancipation, technological innovation, and women’s awakening.

In terms of formal evolution, the cheongsam completed a key transformation from “broad covering” to “fitting and shaping.” The Qing Dynasty banner clothing adopted a “cross-shaped planar structure,” and its broad, straight form did not fit the body’s curves, with the main functions of highlighting hierarchy and covering the body; while the cheongsam in the Republican period gradually introduced Western three-dimensional cutting technology. Through structural adjustments such as bust darts, waist darts, and shoulder seams, it fit women’s body curves and displayed the natural beauty of the human body. This transformation was not merely a style innovation but a breakthrough in the feudal “covering” aesthetic concept, echoing the physical emancipation movements such as the “Breast Liberation Movement” and “Foot-Binding Abolition Movement,” and reflecting women’s regaining control of their physical sovereignty. From the “inverted wide-sleeve cheongsam” of the 1910s to the 1920s to the “Shanghai-style cheongsam” of the 1930s to the 1940s, every detail adjustment—from flared sleeves to sleeveless designs, from conservative slits to moderate openings, and from heavy fabrics to lightweight materials—highlighted the transformation of aesthetic concepts from “obeying ritual” to “pursuing individuality.”

In terms of functional transformation, the cheongsam achieved a leap from “status symbol” to “individual expression.” Feudal-era clothing defined social status through differences in style, material, and pattern, while the Republican cheongsam broke this hierarchical restriction and became a common choice for women of all classes. Intellectual women preferred plain woolen cheongsams, with simple designs echoing the pursuit of “internal cultivation”; working women chose loose cheongsams made of cotton and linen to suit physical labor needs; urban middle-class women favored silk printed cheongsams paired with Western accessories to highlight modern charm. Behind this functional diversification was the essential transformation of clothing from “serving the system” to “serving people,” confirming the respect for individual value and personal expression in modern society.

In terms of cultural connotation, the cheongsam elevated from a “carrier of feudal ritual” to a “modern

cultural symbol.” It retained traditional clothing elements such as standing collars, frog buttons, and slanting front plackets, continuing the cultural genes of Chinese clothing; at the same time, it integrated Western cutting and design concepts, reflecting the integration and mutual learning of Chinese and Western cultures. The popularity of the cheongsam was not only a clothing fashion but also an expression of cultural attitude—it symbolized women’s independence and freedom, carried the confidence and innovation of national culture, and became a cultural symbol of modern China seeking balance between tradition and modernity, East and West. The rise of mass media further promoted the cultural dissemination of the cheongsam. Cheongsam images and comments published in Republican periodicals such as *Linglong* and *Liangyou*, as well as the cheongsam styles of movie stars, made the cheongsam an important medium for leading fashion and spreading new ideas, continuously enriching its cultural connotation.

In addition, technological innovation provided material support for the aesthetic evolution of the cheongsam. The introduction of modern Western textile technology and the popularization of machine production promoted the widespread use of affordable fabrics such as rayon and printed cloth, reducing the production cost of the cheongsam and promoting its popularization from an aristocratic exclusive clothing to the general public. The popularization of sewing machines improved the efficiency and precision of cheongsam production. The combination of traditional craftsmanship and modern machine technology not only retained the traditional charm of the cheongsam but also enhanced its practicality and fashion sense. Research by Liu Ruipu’s team has shown that the transformation of the cheongsam from the “cross-shaped planar structure” to “three-dimensional cutting” is the result of the integration of traditional clothing wisdom and modern technological innovation, reflecting the positive impact of industrial civilization on traditional clothing.

4. Conclusion

During China’s modern social transformation, the rise and aesthetic evolution of the cheongsam were the product of the joint action of multiple factors such as institutional relaxation, ideological emancipation, and technological innovation. The collapse of the feudal clothing etiquette system provided the institutional premise for the reform of the cheongsam; the “institutional blank” and policy guidance of the Republican government created a relaxed environment for the popularity of the cheongsam; while ideological emancipation and technological innovation injected core momentum into its aesthetic transformation. From a “carrier of ritual” to a “cultural symbol,” from “broad covering” to “fitting and shaping,” and from “status symbol” to “individual expression,” each aesthetic adjustment of the cheongsam resonated with the transformation of modern Chinese society, fully reflecting the profound changes in ideological concepts, gender relations, and social structure.

The modern evolution of the cheongsam was not only a clothing revolution but also a cultural revolution. It broke the hierarchical constraints of feudal clothing, highlighting individual value and personal expression; it broke through the traditional “covering” aesthetic, establishing the aesthetic criterion of natural human beauty; it integrated the essence of Chinese and Western cultures, displaying the open and inclusive cultural attitude of modern China. As a unique window for observing China’s modern social transformation, the aesthetic evolution of the cheongsam reveals a core logic: clothing reform has always been deeply intertwined with social reform, and institutional relaxation is often the premise and key to clothing innovation.

The limitation of this study lies in its focus on the macro relationship between institutional relaxation and the cheongsam’s evolution, lacking sufficient attention to the differences in cheongsam wearing practices and aesthetic preferences among different regions and social groups. Future research can further expand the scope, exploring the dissemination and variation of the cheongsam in small and medium-sized cities and rural areas, as well as the cheongsam wearing experiences of ethnic minority women and rural women, to enrich the understanding of

the complexity of the cheongsam's modern evolution. The experience of “integrating tradition and modernity” and “unifying function and aesthetics” formed by the cheongsam in its modern transformation also provides important enlightenment for the activation of contemporary traditional clothing culture—only by grounding in the contemporary context and balancing the inheritance of traditional genes with modern innovation can traditional clothing continue to carry cultural significance and radiate contemporary vitality.

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